

Schmitz, Hans, 1914-2007



A short biography of German anarcho-syndicalist, militant anti-fascist and conscript to the Wehrmacht, Hans Schmitz.

Hans Schmitz was born in Wuppertal, Germany in 1914.

His father, * a leading activist in the anarcho-syndicalist union the FAUD, was a devout Catholic and a convinced pacifist from both a religious and ideological standpoint (!). Despite this, as Hans Schmitz reports, he carried a weapon as a member of the "Red Ruhr Army" during the right-wing Kapp putsch.

His father was also active in the Liga für Mutterschutz und Soziale Familienhygiene (League for the Protection of Mothers and Social Family Hygiene). The League secretly obtained abortions for women.

Hans' mother, active in the anarcho-syndicalist women's movement, was one of those who carried out abortions in their small apartment. His father never spoke of it at the time, but much later it came up in conversation.

After being beaten up on the way to a youth meeting by a group of Freikorps thugs, Hans rejected pacifism and replaced the broken rifle on the black flag with the red hammer and sickle. Much to the irritation of the adult anarcho-syndicalists, Hans Schmitz argued against his father thus:

"We've had enough of 'Turn the other cheek'; it hurts!" and at the same time mentioned the rifle that his father had carried.

Hans himself became a member of the SAJD (Anarcho-syndicalist Youth) and the FAUD.

In the last years of the Weimar Republic the situation escalated, and the young anarcho-syndicalists founded the Schwarzen Scharen - "black crowds" - who set themselves against the Nazis' gangs of thugs. Because of the uniforms, there was further protest from the ranks of the FAUD. Nevertheless, the Wuppertal Schwarzen Scharen, to which Hans Schmitz belonged, was appointed as protectors at demonstrations and rallies.

At this period wearing a black shirt could get you hanged. Hans Schmitz tells how when wearing a black shirt he was arrested for possessing an offensive weapon, a penknife. A few metres further on Hitler Youth were marching with dagger-like knives, but the police didn't have a problem with these, as they were sheath-knives, in leather scabbards.

With the seizure of power by the Nazis in 1933, the anarcho-syndicalist groups disbanded, including the Wuppertal branch, of which Hans Schmitz was treasurer. Resistance however did not cease.



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With a smile on his face he tells how the torchlight procession of the Nazis literally [a pun here that doesn’t translate] fell in the water – chased into the river Wupper by communists, anarchists and unionists.

Thereafter the torchlight processions were held during daylight. Hans Schmitz and a dozen other anarchist and communist youths several times stampeded the Nazi-saluting celebrating crowds into the torchlight processions, and the SS thugs thus provoked attacked the revellers with their torches. This little game was repeated a few times, until the SS discovered the real cause of the tumult, and the youngsters decided the best thing to do was vanish.

In the following months and years there were many examples of anti-fascist activity: posters were stuck up, (an activity that the anti-fascist youth very quickly discontinued when they saw how the SS made their arrested friends tear the posters off walls with bare blood-encrusted hands), antifascist slogans were stamped onto the streets using the bottoms of suitcases! The most important function of the underground groups was transporting wanted political refugees over the border. Hans Schmitz functioned as a bicycle courier, passing himself off as a sports cyclist.

In 1935 Hans Schmitz met his future wife , who was a member of the “Düssel Pirates”. This group was being attacked on the street by the Hitler Youth and Hans and his friends intervened to rescue them. Young people who refused to join the Hitler Youth, became Edelweiss Pirates, and wore check shirts and red neckerchiefs. Often local groups named themselves after local rivers. Soon there were also Wupper Pirates.

On 1 April 1937 during a wave of arrests Hans Schmitz was visited by the Gestapo at his workplace. He had been tipped off, so the Gestapo could find no evidence of anti-fascist activity. So he only got two years in prison and had more luck than many of his anarcho-syndicalist colleagues, who were sentenced to death in the subsequent mass trials. After his release he was classed as unfit for military service, which suited him fine. He again became active in the resistance.

To his disappointment his unfitness for military service did not last for ever. When he got married in 1942 his wife’s employer saw to it that he recovered from his unfitness for military duty, so that his wife could continue working in her war-relevant employment, instead of accompanying her husband back to Wuppertal.

Hans Schmitz accordingly joined the Wehrmacht. Resistance from within the Wehrmacht was certainly a difficult enterprise, yet possible to a certain extent: to stay as far as possible from the front, listen in to enemy transmissions... a clique of former resistance people grouped together and organised these various efforts. Towards the end of the war Hans was in an anti-aircraft battery and he sabotaged things so that not a single shot was fired.

The end of the war saw Hans Schmitz in Holland. He reports that the relationship between the Dutch population and the ordinary soldiers was an exceptionally good one. When the Dutch informed on former collaborators who were hoarding food, the former Wehrmacht soldiers confiscated this and shared it with their informants.

After the war Hans joined the FFS (Federation of Libertarian Socialists) set up by Otto Reimers and others. He was disheartened by the fact that many comrades were now broken physically and mentally and wanted nothing more to do with the movement. Nevertheless he maintained his commitment to anarchism.

At the end of the war he also organised a wildcat strike. This was during the “hunger winters”

when many died. The strike gained demands like breaks and heating in the workshops. His boss had threatened him with the sack before the strike but he continued to work there until

he drew his pension. He made contact with the movement again in the 1990s and worked with the FAU and the anti-fascist movement up until his death on 22 March 2007.

Nick Heath

Hans Schmitz gives more details about his experiences in the essay “Resistance – A Personal Account”. The essay is to be found in the book “Se krije us nit kaputt” [a dialect expression that means “they won’t beat us”] published by the Cultural Group of the Wuppertal Resistance. Faces of the Wuppertal Resistance. Essen 1995)

* Hans Schmitz Senior was born in 1891 in Polch in the Eifel district. A building worker, he was one of the leading FAUD activists in the Ruhr. He died on 28th January 1931, as the results of complications a year after he received serious head injuries after a quarrel with a Nazi.